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Saudi Air Force Modernization: The Emergence of a Regional Power

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A Research Paper

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May 1985*

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Saudi Air Force Modernization: The Emergence of a Regional Power

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
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Saudi Air Force Modernization: The Emergence of a Regional Power

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 March 1985
was used in this report.*

Saudi officials view the Air Force as the mainstay of their country's national defense. The Air Force has received more than half of the \$110 billion spent by Riyadh on military programs over the last decade and has become the second-largest and one of the most capable air forces in the Persian Gulf:

- The Air Force has nearly tripled in size since 1973, from approximately 80 combat aircraft to almost 200—including 60 F-15 fighters.
- The shootdown of at least one Iranian aircraft in June 1984 and the Saudi ability to sustain extensive combat air patrols during much of the year demonstrated the improving capability of the Air Force.

Although the Air Force is capable of defending Saudi Arabia against air attacks from Iran, Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), it cannot sustain high-intensity combat against a major regional power such as Israel or Iraq. Nor will it be capable of operating effectively outside of Saudi Arabia in the near term. Facilities needed to support Saudi Air Force operations over Jordan, Iraq, or Syria are inadequate and vulnerable to Israeli airstrikes.

[redacted] a lack of combat experience, and differences in equipment and doctrine will limit the Saudis' ability to coordinate operations with other Arab air forces.

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The Air Force's ability to conduct effective limited air defense reduces the likelihood that Riyadh would immediately request US military assistance in the event of a crisis with Iran or South Yemen. The large, modern Saudi Air Force, supported by the United States, also reduces the likelihood that these regional opponents would risk a military confrontation with Saudi Arabia. US AWACS and tanker support will remain vital to this deterrent and for Saudi air defense operations over the Gulf until at least 1988 when the Saudis begin operating their own AWACS and associated tankers. The Saudis will continue to be cautious in confronting Iran with their airpower, however, lest they provoke Tehran to undertake sabotage and subversion within Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia plans to enlarge and modernize its Air Force further over the next 10 years. Even if oil revenues remain depressed, the Saudis are likely to spend billions of dollars to acquire more F-15s, an integrated air defense command and control system, and West European fighter aircraft. The Air

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Force will be able to train sufficient numbers of new pilots and absorb this new equipment with continued reliance on foreign advisers and technicians—including over 1,700 US Air Force personnel and contractors—to provide critical maintenance and operational skills.

US sales of advanced aircraft to Saudi Arabia are a highly visible and prestigious sign of US support to Riyadh and help maintain US influence in the region. In addition, Saudi equipment and facilities are essentially compatible with those of

Although the Saudis prefer US equipment, Riyadh will not hesitate to buy aircraft and equipment from Western Europe if its wants are not met by the United States.

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Saudi Air Force Modernization: The Emergence of a Regional Power []

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In the mid-1960s the Saudi Air Force was a small, poorly equipped force with only marginal combat capabilities. With the massive increase in oil revenues in the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia could afford to embark on a major program to expand and modernize its armed forces. Faced with scarce manpower resources and the need to deter potential threats on widely separated frontiers, Riyadh has based its defense strategy on building a well-equipped, highly trained air force. We estimate that since 1973 the Air Force has received at least half of the more than \$110 billion spent by the kingdom on military modernization. Because of the Iranian Air Force's combat losses since 1980 and the general decline in its operational readiness, the Saudi Air Force now ranks second in size only to that of Iraq in the Persian Gulf. []

The Saudi Air Force has grown in size from 80 combat aircraft and 5,500 personnel in 1973 to almost 200 combat aircraft and 17,000 personnel today. In 1973 the Air Force was equipped with US F-86 and British Lightning fighters and light counterinsurgency aircraft. Over the last decade, it has taken delivery of over 170 advanced fighters and fighter-bombers—60 F-15s and 114 F-5s—greatly increasing both the size and capabilities of its force. The Air Force now consists of eight combat squadrons—one Lightning, three F-15, and four F-5 squadrons—a reconnaissance squadron, two transport squadrons equipped with C-130s and KC-130 tankers, a VIP transport squadron, two utility helicopter squadrons, and two training squadrons (see appendix A). []

In addition to acquiring new aircraft, the Air Force has completed six well-equipped airbases and a number of secondary military and civilian airfields. The largest airbases—among the most modern in the Middle East—are equipped with hardened multiple-bay aircraft shelters, multiple runways and taxiways, underground fuel lines, ammunition bunkers, and command bunkers. []

Air Force Effectiveness

Enhanced Operations in 1984. Increased air attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf by Iraq and Iran in the spring of 1984 and the failure of Saudi F-15s on ground alert to intercept Iranian aircraft attacking tankers in the northern Gulf near Saudi Arabia led the Saudis to institute daylight combat air patrols near Dhahran on 25 May. These airborne patrols—consisting of two or more F-15s or F-5s—significantly improved the Saudi capability to respond to Iranian antishipping strikes in the northern Gulf. On 5 June two Saudi F-15s used AIM-7F radar-guided air-to-air missiles to shoot down at least one Iranian F-4 on a bombing mission over the northern Gulf. []

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The Air Force continued daily daylight combat air patrols through mid-December, according to AWACS reporting, significantly enhancing the experience and confidence of Saudi pilots and maintenance crews. The Saudis flew as many as 22 sorties a day and maintained an additional four to 10 aircraft on ground alert, []

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The combat air patrols were flown at low levels—generally more strenuous to pilots and aircraft than high-altitude flying—to avoid Iranian radar detection. []

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During this time, the Saudis did not lose any aircraft, and no serious accidents were reported. []

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Although the increased operational levels improved Saudi air defense capabilities, they also taxed Air Force personnel and equipment. Within a month of

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Figure 1. The old and the new—a Saudi Lightning and F-15. [redacted]

instituting combat air patrols, the operational readiness rate for Saudi F-15s temporarily declined from about 80 percent to just over 50 percent. [redacted]

Nevertheless, Air Force flightline maintenance crews—including seconded Pakistani personnel—successfully coped with the increased demands on the aircraft, and F-15 operational readiness rates increased to 70 percent by early July. [redacted]

[redacted] began flying combat air patrols in late June and by December were flying approximately 45 percent of the sorties. [redacted]

Other significant Air Force operations in 1984 included an airlift of air defense equipment to augment defenses along the Gulf in late June. [redacted]

[redacted]—a distance of more than 700 nautical miles—according to defense attache reporting. During the two-week airlift, the two Saudi transport squadrons operated from six different airfields and flew 47 C-130 sorties. [redacted]

The Saudis also conducted at least four major exercises involving the forward basing of combat aircraft in 1984. These exercises demonstrated the growing operational flexibility of the Air Force and its capability to deploy quickly and operate from airfields anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. We believe the Saudis can reinforce quickly any of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ with a limited number of combat aircraft during a crisis. [redacted]

¹ The Gulf Cooperation Council includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. [redacted]

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Figure 2



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All of the exercises involved the deployment of part of a squadron—usually eight to 10 aircraft—to a secondary airfield within Saudi Arabia or to an airbase in Kuwait or Oman, where they conducted fighter and fighter-bomber training missions for up to two weeks, according to defense attache reporting. These deployments were supported by C-130 flights airlifting maintenance crews, equipment, and, on at least one occasion, aviation fuel. At least four of the Air Force's eight combat squadrons participated in these exercises, including two of the F-5 squadrons, the Lightning squadron, and one of the F-15 squadrons. []

Pilot Training and Proficiency. The proficiency of senior Saudi pilots contributed significantly to the effectiveness of Saudi air operations over the last year. Virtually all of the pilots are Saudis—fewer than 12 Pakistani pilots are flying in the C-130 or F-5 squadrons—and all new pilots are trained in US Air Force tactics by Saudi instructors in Saudi Arabia. Many of the senior pilots—originally trained in the

United States or the United Kingdom—have more than 1,500 hours of flight time and are highly regarded by their US Air Force counterparts. []

Overall pilot proficiency, however, especially in the F-5 squadrons, is only moderate. []

[] The defense attache reports that Air Force exercises are not overly demanding, except when US Air Force “aggressor” teams deploy to Saudi Arabia and fly realistic exercises against the Saudis. Moreover, Air Force training tends to concentrate on air defense and airstrike missions, and few close-support training exercises are conducted with the Army. []

The lack of standardized squadron operating procedures limits the ability of squadrons to operate together effectively and prevents the rotation of pilots and

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Saudi Rapid Deployment Forces

Air Force participation in Saudi- and GCC-sponsored exercises over the past two years demonstrates a growing capability to airlift Saudi forces quickly to the Arab Gulf states. In the event of an Iranian-sponsored insurrection or coup attempt in one of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, we believe Saudi rapid deployment forces—large, by regional standards—could be decisive in restoring internal security in the threatened state. Saudi troop and aircraft deployments, with support from the other Gulf states, would also be a factor in deterring Iranian military intervention in behalf of dissident elements. [redacted]

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Saudi rapid deployment forces consist of an airborne brigade and the two Air Force C-130 squadrons. During the GCC exercise in 1983, the Saudis airlifted the airborne brigade—approximately 1,000 paratroopers, including their crew-served weapons and light vehicles—over 800 nautical miles from northwestern Saudi Arabia to an airfield in the United Arab Emirates. [redacted]

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key personnel between squadrons during a crisis. In addition, Saudi pilots tend to be loyal to their squadrons to the point that they do not share their training experiences with pilots from other squadrons, which diminishes the effectiveness of training exercises.

[redacted]

In the future, these Saudi forces could be augmented by Gulf state contingents that will be part of the joint rapid deployment force. The GCC plans to base this force at Hafar al Batin, in northeastern Saudi Arabia, near the Kuwaiti border. The planned force will contain two infantry brigades—one brigade composed of units from the five smaller GCC member states and a Saudi infantry brigade. Although these forces will have only a nominal conventional combat capability, we believe they would constitute sizable reinforcements for local internal security forces. [redacted]

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Air Force Leadership. The Air Force is led by well-educated, competent, and professional officers who are aggressive proponents of modernized Saudi airpower. Many commanders are members of the royal family, and several of these are experienced fighter pilots. Princes also command several of the major fighter bases.

[redacted]

[redacted] even if they are junior in rank.

Moreover, daily operations are affected by the tendency of some junior and middle-ranking staff officers to work half a day in the Air Force and then work at their private business in the afternoon. [redacted]

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when present on maintenance teams, are either supervisors or tend to let the Pakistanis do the work. []

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Air Force Command and Control. The Air Force has a nationwide command and control system that divides the country into five air defense sectors. The system consists of aging British and US ground radars and six command centers. Each air defense sector has its own command center, which, in our view, gives the Saudis a better capability to cope with simultaneous operations in different sectors without overwhelming Air Force headquarters in Riyadh. []

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[] it is the most complete on the Arabian Peninsula. []

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**Expansion and Modernization Programs:
Plans for the Next Decade**

Air Force modernization will remain a high priority for Riyadh, in our view. Riyadh plans to allocate more than \$9 billion during the next five years to new Air Force programs. The Saudis intend to replace aging aircraft with more modern fighters, complete the most advanced air defense/command and control network in the region, continue to upgrade and harden air-bases, and acquire significant quantities of advanced munitions. []

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Maintenance and Support Capabilities. The Air Force currently maintains a high (70 to 80 percent) aircraft operational readiness rate. Saudi F-15 maintenance efforts, however, ultimately depend on US contractor support. In our judgment, the operational readiness of these squadrons would decline significantly if US support were withdrawn. More than 1,700 US personnel—108 Air Force personnel and 1,618 contractors, equivalent to 10 percent of Saudi Air Force manpower—are involved in supporting Air Force programs, according to defense attache reporting. []

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We believe that the Air Force is capable of maintaining moderate-to-high readiness rates for F-5 and C-130 aircraft without US support as long as Pakistani maintenance crews are available. US contractors are only present at the depot level to monitor work on these aircraft. Withdrawal of the large number of seconded Pakistani Air Force personnel would substantially diminish Saudi capabilities to maintain their F-5 and C-130 squadrons. Approximately 1,500 Pakistanis serve in the Saudi Air Force and perform much of the aircraft flightline maintenance. []

[] Saudi personnel,

Aircraft Modernization. The Air Force intends to acquire 80 to 100 advanced aircraft over the next five years to replace its aging Lightning and early-model F-5 fighters, according to defense attache reporting. The Saudi request to purchase 40 additional F-15 fighters from the United States is designed to meet part of this requirement. The Saudis also are negotiating with France to purchase 40 Mirage 2000s and with the United Kingdom for 40 Tornados. We believe that Air Force officials prefer the F-15s to the European aircraft, but Riyadh is likely to purchase as many as two squadrons of advanced West European aircraft—probably the Mirage 2000— []

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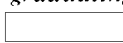
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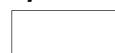
*The Peace Projects: Major Saudi Air Programs*Peace Sun—


four F-5 fighter-bomber squadrons constitute the primary striking power of the Air Force. The F-5E fighter-bombers are air refuelable and are armed with precision-guided munitions, including the Maverick air-to-ground missile and Paveway laser-guided glide bombs, according to defense attache reporting. The Air Force also uses the F-5E armed with the AIM-9P air-to-air missile as backup air defense fighters. 


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The best of the Saudi F-5 pilots were chosen for the F-15 program, 


 By early 1984 the Saudi F-15 pilots had an average of 500 hours of flight time. In mid-1984 the Saudis had approximately 55 fully trained F-15 pilots, still less than a 1:1 pilot-to-aircraft ratio. The Air Force is graduating an additional 20 to 25 F-15 pilots a year. 

 The Saudis are intensively training new F-5 pilots, however, and the Peace Hawk program remains one of the most successful Air Force programs of the last decade. The F-5 squadrons remain almost fully manned, are self-sufficient in base-level maintenance, and are the most operationally flexible squadrons in the Air Force. 

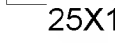
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The first F-15 squadron—the 13th—was formed as a conversion training unit in 1983 and is based at Dhahran on the Persian Gulf. The remaining two F-15 squadrons, the 5th and 6th, were formed in early 1984 as additional aircraft were delivered and 


These two squadrons are still undergoing training and at the end of 1984 were not fully operational. The 6th Squadron at Khamis Mushayt is conducting ground attack training using modified F-5 bomb racks. 


Peace Sentinel—The AWACS Program. Saudi Arabia, in a major effort to upgrade its air defense capabilities, purchased five E-3A AWACS aircraft and eight KE-3A tanker aircraft from the United States for \$3 billion in 1981. No aircraft have been delivered, but Saudi crews are training on the US AWACS in the Elf One contingent that has been in Saudi Arabia since 1980. The first Saudi AWACS is scheduled to be delivered in late 1986 

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Peace Hawk—The F-5 Program. The Saudis took delivery of over 100 F-5s between 1973 and 1982. The 

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Air Force officials also plan to improve electronic countermeasures (ECM) and reconnaissance capabilities. The Air Force is taking delivery of a squadron of 10 RF-5E aircraft and plans to equip them with the AN/ALQ-171 ECM pod and improved sensing systems, according to defense attache reporting. The AN/ALQ-171 also can be used on Saudi F-15s. 

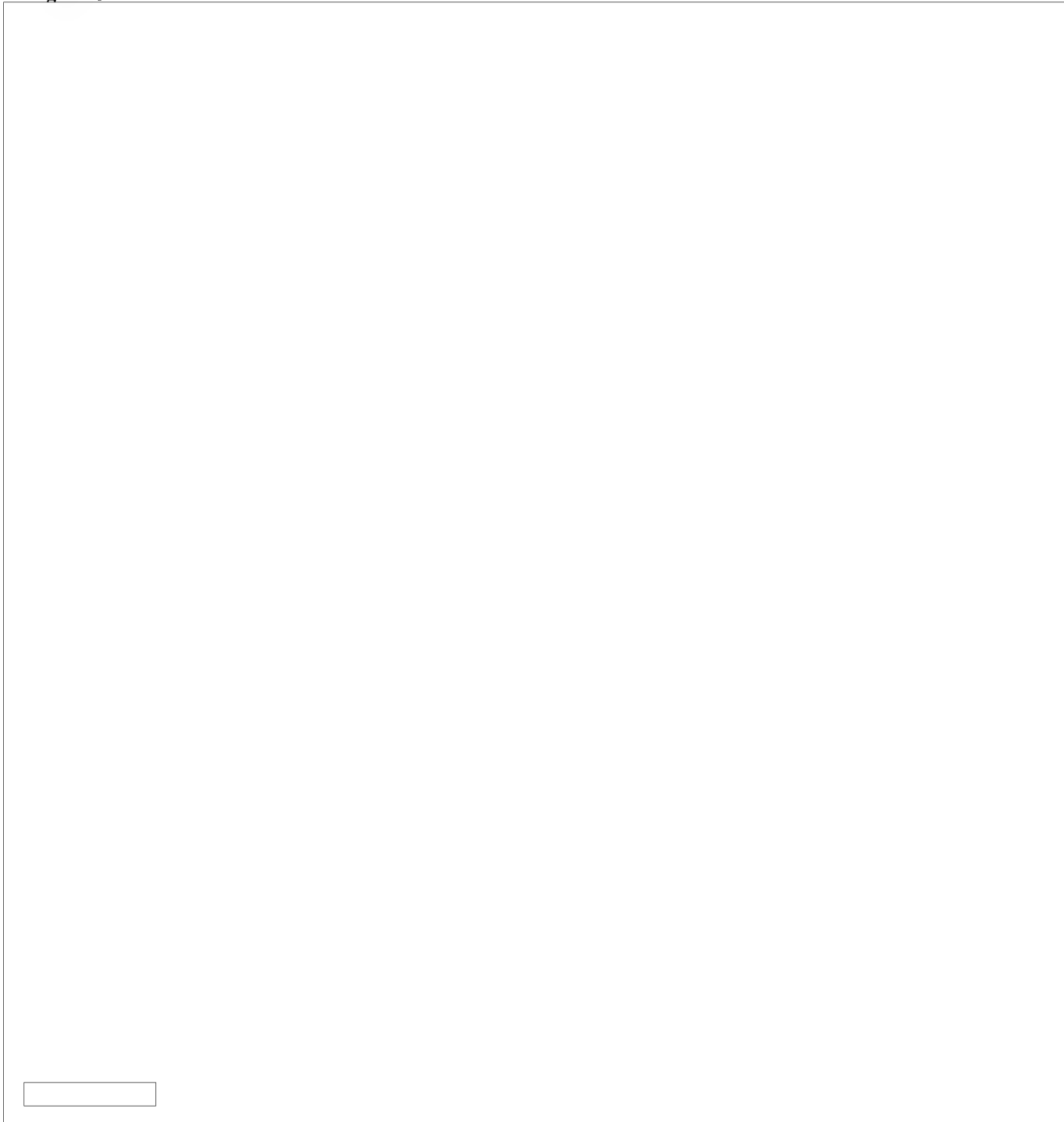
In addition, the Saudis will receive their first AWACS in 1986. Delivery of the five E-3A AWACS and the eight KE-3A tankers on order will continue through the end of the decade. 

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Figure 6



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Command and Control Modernization. Peace Shield is a five-year, \$4 billion program to modernize the Saudi air defense/command and control network, which, when completed, will be the most advanced system in the region. Current plans call for a nationwide series of hardened command and control bunkers, automated ground radar sites, and ground entry stations that will receive AWACS data and fully automate the flow of information between command centers.

and construction is continuing on the others. Final design and partial contract awards were decided in February 1985, with completion of the project scheduled for the early 1990s.

Airbase Improvement. The Air Force is continuing a \$1 billion program to build hardened hangarages to shelter F-15s.

These hangarages—designed to withstand a direct hit by a 1,000-pound bomb—have been completed at Dhahran, and construction is planned for 60 each at the F-15 fighter bases at Khamis Mushayt and At Ta'if. When the hangarages are completed, Saudi aircraft will be significantly less vulnerable to a preemptive airstrike, in our analysis.

The defense attache reports that the Air Force is also upgrading selected secondary airfields throughout the kingdom. Airfields at Ha'il and Hafar al Batin can now sustain limited F-5 operations, according to imagery. Facilities and runways have been expanded at both bases, and multiple-bay hangarages have been constructed at Ha'il. The upgrading of additional bases will increase Saudi flexibility in responding to threats and increase their capability to disperse aircraft quickly, in our view.

Advanced Munitions. The Saudis are seeking to add to their already considerable stock of advanced munitions. This program is driven, in part, by a desire to reduce Riyadh's vulnerability to a Western arms embargo during a crisis, a concern about the large number of armored vehicles in the inventories of potential opponents, and a realistic Saudi assessment that the Army could not adequately defend against a ground attack, in our view.

and it plans to purchase

more advanced models of these weapons,

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which would give the Air Force a standoff capability against surface-to-air missile sites.

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Constraints to Modernization. The greatest obstacle to completion of Air Force modernization plans is the shortage of qualified personnel. The continued Air Force expansion we anticipate over the next five to 10 years will aggravate traditional Saudi military problems such as manpower shortages and overdependence on foreign personnel. Although we believe that the Saudis probably can train sufficient pilots to man the new advanced fighters we expect them to receive, this probably will reduce the number of pilots available to man the F-5s. In any event, if Air Force expansion continues, the Saudis are unlikely to achieve a pilot ratio of much better than 1 to 1, even for their advanced fighters. As a result, the cadre of experienced pilots will not be large enough to sustain high-intensity combat. Shortages of qualified native manpower for key support slots such as navigators, loadmasters, air controllers, and mechanics could become even more acute in the near future, forcing greater reliance on Pakistani military personnel and foreign contractors.

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The Air Force has a comprehensive system of military schools designed to train career technicians and mechanics. Still, shortages of qualified manpower entering the service and limited numbers of flightline personnel—partly caused by the low prestige Saudis associate with manual labor—seriously hamper Saudi efforts to become self-sufficient in maintenance crews.

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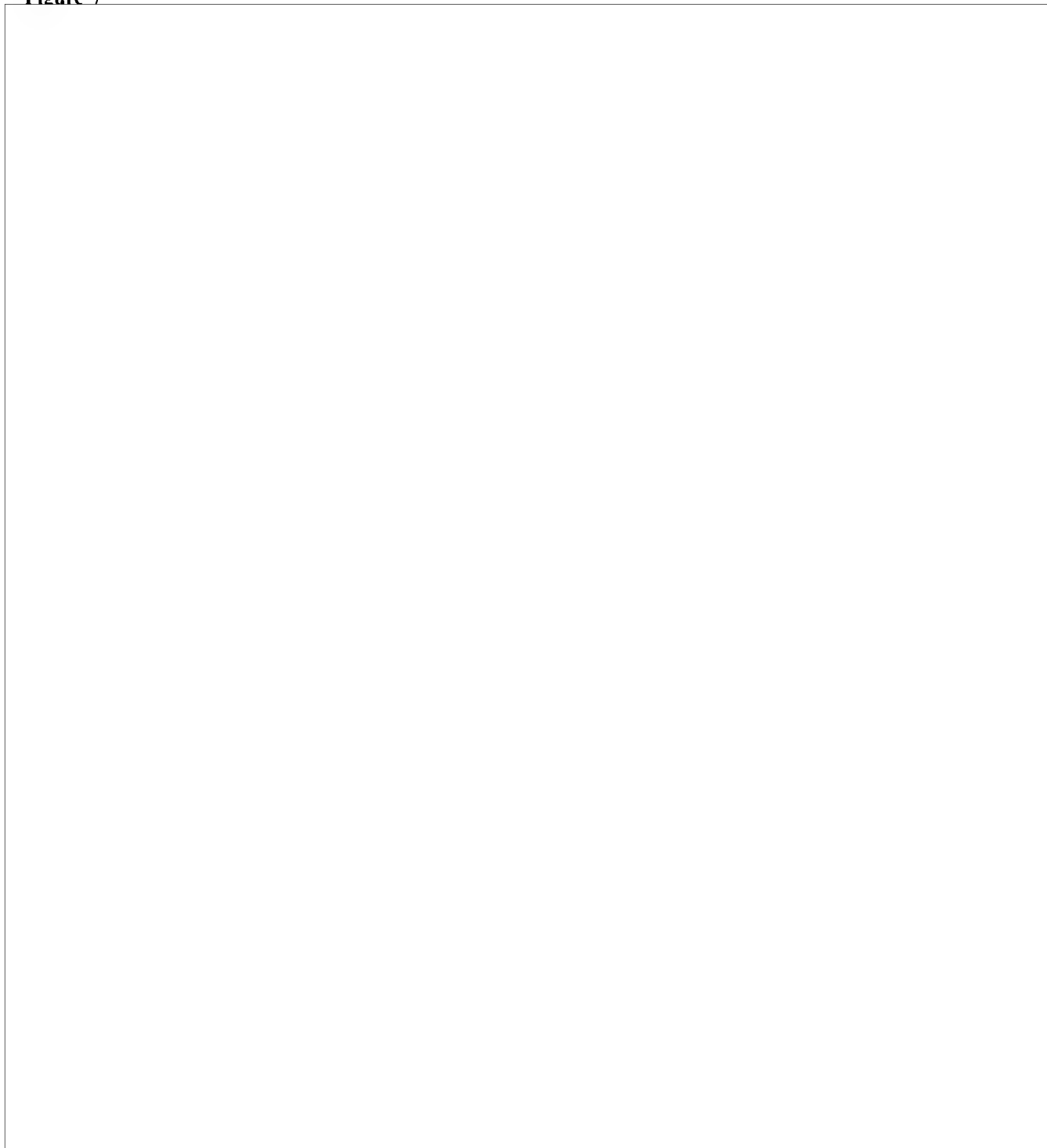
Should expatriate personnel return home or refuse to serve in wartime, the operational readiness of the Air Force's advanced equipment would decline dramatically.

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Figure 7



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Saudi officials believe that a modern Air Force is vital to national security, and funding of Air Force modernization programs will remain a high priority. Even in the event of a serious economic downturn, we believe critical programs—AWACS, additional F-15s, and Peace Shield—will be fully funded, even at the expense of Army or Navy programs. Funding for some of the more ambitious Air Force programs, however, such as the proposal to maintain large stocks

of aviation fuel in depots inside mountains, [redacted]

[redacted] is likely to be curtailed or eliminated if budgetary cutbacks become necessary.

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Air Force Capabilities Today and Tomorrow

[redacted] attacking across the northern Persian Gulf. Continued US AWACS and tanker support is vital, however, to successful Saudi air defense efforts. Since the shootdown on 5 June, Iranian airstrikes on shipping in the Gulf have been outside areas patrolled by the Saudi Air Force, indicating an Iranian effort to avoid another clash and to husband dwindling air assets. The Iranian Air Force is likely to continue to suffer from serious equipment deficiencies as long as the Iran-Iraq war continues and equipment embargoes remain in effect.² [redacted]

[redacted]

The Saudi Air Force will probably continue to maintain a numerical and technical advantage over the Iranian Air Force for at least several years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. After the war ends, we do not expect the Iranian regime to restore the Air Force to its prewar capabilities and size because of distrust of the regular military and the high cost of acquiring large numbers of advanced aircraft.

[redacted]

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The Saudis have a decisive technical and numerical superiority over both North and South Yemen. The Yemeni air forces—equipped primarily with aging, early-model MIGs—suffer from poorly trained pilots

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and support personnel, vulnerable facilities, and inadequate air defenses, in our analysis. Either air force would suffer heavy losses in a clash with Saudi F-15s.

[REDACTED]

We believe that it is unlikely that either North or South Yemen will acquire sophisticated aircraft capable of challenging Saudi F-15s within the next five years. Neither country can afford to expend the billions of dollars needed to expand and modernize their air and air defense forces, and both countries will continue to suffer from shortages of qualified personnel, especially pilots. [REDACTED]

In a major sustained confrontation with Iraq, the Saudis could not overcome the more than 3-to-1 Iraqi edge in aircraft, and attrition would eventually seriously degrade Saudi capabilities. In a short clash, however, we believe that Saudi equipment, training, and tactics would give them an advantage, and they could inflict significant losses on the Iraqis. Saudi F-15 pilots are likely to be more aggressive than their Iraqi counterparts, and Saudi tactics and command and control flexibility would also give them advantages in a conflict, in our view. The long-range radars and air-to-air missiles on the Saudi F-15s would give Saudi pilots greater weapons range and firepower over Iraqi fighters. Moreover, hardened Saudi facilities near Iraq would be difficult for the Iraqi Air Force to neutralize. [REDACTED]

The balance between the Iraqi Air Force and the Saudi Air Force will remain essentially unchanged over the next decade. The Iraqi Air Force will retain a commanding advantage in numbers over the Saudis, but the Saudis will probably still have superior fighter aircraft and a more flexible command and control system. Moreover, the Saudis will be able to operate from additional upgraded and hardened airbases near Iraq, increasing their operational flexibility and further decreasing Iraq's capability to neutralize Saudi facilities, in our analysis. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Even experienced Saudi

pilots would be at a marked disadvantage flying against combat-hardened Israeli pilots, and the Saudi Air Force does not have the necessary equipment or training to function effectively in a high-intensity ECM environment. Saudi personnel losses could not be replaced, and the effectiveness of Saudi units sustaining even moderate casualties would be immediately and significantly degraded. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] As demonstrated in Lebanon in 1982, the Israeli Air Force's command and control system can effectively collect and disseminate threat data to friendly combat aircraft on a near-real-time basis. Moreover, the Israelis are very familiar with the tactics and aircraft capabilities of their opposition and have a relatively large, skilled, and aggressive cadre of pilots who are trained to act autonomously. Israel's active electronic warfare capability is second to none in the region—the result of superior equipment, a well-formulated tactical doctrine, and extensive combat experience. Saudi Arabia cannot begin to match these capabilities, which provide the Israelis with a significant force multiplier against the large air forces of their Arab neighbors.

[REDACTED] Other airfields in the area have poor support facilities and could, at best, serve only as dispersal strips. Because of the lack of aircraft shelters and air defense units, aircraft staging from [REDACTED]

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them would be highly vulnerable to Israeli attack. The Saudis, moreover, have little rapid runway repair capability and no experience supporting extended high-intensity combat operations. [REDACTED]

Because of the Air Force's logistic problems and the vulnerability of such a contingent to Israeli attack, we doubt that the Saudis would send fighter aircraft to either Jordan or Syria. The Air Force can deploy an F-5 squadron to neighboring friendly countries as demonstrated during exercises with Oman and Kuwait in 1984. Saudi F-5s in Jordan or Syria would be almost useless against Israeli F-15s or F-16s, however, and also would be vulnerable to destruction on the ground. We believe that, for at least the next five years, the Saudis will be unable to send F-15 fighters outside the kingdom without substantial US support. Even within Saudi Arabia, deployments of F-15s away from their home bases at At Ta'if, Dhahran, and Khamis Mushayt are rare. In the air intercept role, however, Saudi F-15s with conformal fuel tanks or air refueling can reach Jordan or southern Syria from airbases deep inside Saudi Arabia. Still, in operations over these countries, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Moreover, the Saudis have never conducted training exercises with Syria, Jordan, or Iraq. [REDACTED]

Implications for the United States

Continued US sales of advanced aircraft to the Saudi Air Force are a highly visible and prestigious sign of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Saudis view the Air Force as the most vital component of their national defense and realize that US support has been essential in its development. As the Arab Gulf states expand regional military cooperation and pursue the goal of compatible equipment, a US-equipped Saudi Air Force—the dominant air force of the GCC states—would encourage additional purchases of US military equipment in the region. Even though Saudi officers prefer US equipment, we judge that Riyadh will continue to purchase some equipment from Western Europe and, if turned down by the United States, will not hesitate to buy the needed aircraft and equipment from Western Europe. [REDACTED]

The growing capability of the Air Force to operate effectively in the Persian Gulf reduces the likelihood that Riyadh will immediately request US military assistance during a crisis, in our view. The Saudi Government, as demonstrated in the shootdown of the Iranian fighter last June, is willing to allow the Saudi military to try to handle a low-level challenge from a regional opponent before requesting US military intervention. A large, modern Air Force [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] would risk a serious military confrontation with Saudi Arabia. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Saudi aircraft, spare parts, and airbases are essentially compatible with the US Air Force. The large Saudi stocks of munitions and parts would provide a supplemental logistic base for US Air Force operations and would facilitate a rapid US deployment into the region, in our view. [REDACTED]

We believe that the Air Force's growing size and capabilities could make it difficult for Riyadh to avoid being drawn into a future Arab-Israeli war. If such a conflict looks likely, Riyadh's Arab neighbors would urge it to commit its airpower, especially the F-15s and AWACS. In previous wars, the Saudis have sent only a token force of ground units and have never contributed air units. [REDACTED]

We judge, however, that [REDACTED] the Saudi political leadership will attempt to sidestep Arab calls for significant Saudi involvement. Several important factors would influence Riyadh's decision:

- The Saudis almost certainly realize that their military forces would be quickly overwhelmed by Israel. [REDACTED]

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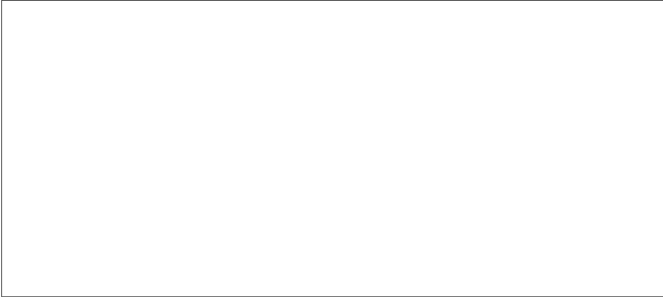
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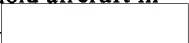
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- In the eyes of its leaders, Saudi Arabia continues to face potential threats from Iran, the Yemens, and, over the long term, Iraq. The Air Force is the kingdom's first line of defense and its only truly effective military force. Substantial losses of aircraft and pilots in a general Arab-Israeli war would cripple Riyadh's ability to respond to threats from other regional powers. 

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Despite these considerations, we believe that Israeli military planners view the Saudi Air Force's continued modernization with alarm. The Israelis could decide to launch an overwhelming preemptive strike on key Saudi facilities during the opening stages of a future war if they believed Saudi Air Force participation was probable or to avoid having to hold aircraft in reserve to meet a potential Saudi threat 

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Appendix A**Selected Saudi Aircraft and Armaments**

Aircraft	Role
45 F-15C	Fighter
15 F-15D	Trainer/fighter-bomber
62 F-5E	Fighter/fighter-bomber
37 F-5B/F	Trainer/fighter
10 RF-5E	Reconnaissance/ECM
24 Lightning	Fighter/fighter-bomber
5 E-3A	AWACS—on order
8 KE-3A	Tankers—on order
30 C-130	Transport
7 KC-130	Aerial refueling for the F-5s

Precision-Guided Air-to-Ground Munitions

AGM-65A Maverick TV-guided air-to-ground missile—1,648 in stock

AGM-65B Maverick TV-guided air-to-ground missile—916 in stock

AGM-65D Maverick TV- and infrared-guided air-to-ground missile—1,600 requested

GBU-12 MK 82 500-pound laser-guided glide bomb—10,000 in stock

GBU-10 MK 84 2,000-pound laser-guided glide bomb—4,000 in stock

GBU-15 2,000-pound long-range glide bomb—800 requested

Harpoon air-launched antiship missile—100 requested

Air-to-Air Missiles

AIM-7F radar-guided air-to-air missile—900 in stock

AIM-9L infrared-guided air-to-air missile—260 in stock, 1,712 on order

AIM-9P infrared-guided air-to-air missile⁴—2,000 in stock, 1,200 on order

US Air Force Elf One Contingent⁵

4 E3-A AWACS

3 KC-135 tankers

2 KC-10 tankers

⁴ Rear aspect only.⁵ Based in Riyadh since 1980; KC-10 tankers arrived in 1984.

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